

The Guardian
Thu 26 Aug 2021

Melbourne campaign to recognise the smell of Vegemite for its heritage value

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City of Melbourne council has recognised the heritage value and ‘sensory experience’ of the Australian yeast spread’s distinctively pungent perfume



Vegemite rolls along production line at the factory in Port Melbourne, which has been producing the spread since the 1920s. The distinctive smell has been recognised for its heritage value Photograph: Julian Smith/AAP

The taste of Australia’s iconic spread has long been divisive. Now the smell of Vegemite is being recognised in its own right.

The City of Melbourne council has recognised the heritage value of the distinctive odour as part of its description of a Port Melbourne factory where the yeast spread has been long manufactured.

The former Kraft Vegemite factory on 1 Vegemite Way, Fishermans Bend, was built more than a century ago. Now owned by Bega, the factory has produced the nation’s supply of Vegemite since the 1920s.

The factory is one of three sites of local significance in Fishermans Bend that were given heritage protection by the City of Melbourne after a review.

“The precinct of Fishermans Bend is an area of Melbourne anticipating lots of growth in the coming years,” Felicity Watson, head of advocacy at the National Trust of Australia (Victoria), told the Guardian Australia.

“It is important for future urban planning in that area to be underpinned by an understanding of its historical significance to Melbourne’s industrial history.”

The Vegemite factory, “and the smell coming from it,” is a large part of that historical significance, Watson said.

The distinctive smell of the factory – near the Westgate freeway, a major traffic artery – is something “you get a whiff of when passing from place to place”, Watson said.

“The National Trust wanted to acknowledge the sensory experience of the place as part of the City of Melbourne’s heritage study.”

However, the council stopped short of declaring the Vegemite smell “significant”. This is in an effort to ensure no “future development of Fishermans Bend” is put in jeopardy, the deputy lord mayor, Nicholas Reece, said in a statement.

He acknowledged the “attachment many people have towards the distinctive smell of the beloved spread” that emanates from the factory, but said the council sought to avoid tying “a smell to the ongoing use of the land”.

But he said the distinctive smell would be recorded as a “recognised part of the site’s history” in the City of Melbourne’s heritage study.

“We see this as an appropriate outcome. We are pleased the smell will still be recognised,” Watson said.

“Our campaign for the smell to be recognised is about acknowledging that the significance of this place goes beyond the bricks and mortar of the factory building.”

The idea of recognising smells as having heritage significance was unusual, Watson conceded, and it was the first time the Trust had proposed it in relation to a heritage place.

Internationally, however, it is an idea that is gaining traction, with Unesco World Heritage recognising the smell of perfume in the Grasse region of France as unique and significant to its heritage in 2018.

“It is an emerging field called olfactory heritage,” Watson said. “It is really looking at the smells and fragrances that people associate with important historical places or practices, and how they can be acknowledged and recorded as meaningful to their community.”

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